

# Outside the box

by Natalie Dawson

As a child in overalls with a layer of mud, I never thought much about future experiences in Alaska. I loved nature because I hunted, fished, caught insects and trapped rabbits with buckets and string. Years of experience brought more questions than answers about the natural world, so I began to pursue a career in biology. Growing up in the Midwest, I longed for mountains, large animals and more snow than Michigan could provide. After my first trip out West I knew that the place I would call home would change dramatically as I grew up.

In college I soon learned that it is important to think “outside of the box,” i.e., to look beyond conventional wisdom and try to see the big picture. Alaska is definitely outside of the box! After years of dreaming, applying, reading and more applying, I found my way to the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, where I am working for the summer in a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service program called the Career Awareness Institute. This program started with two weeks at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia, where I learned about different programs in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as well as the Department of the Interior as a whole. I honed some of my field skills and then set out for Alaska for the summer.

Working with the Kenai Refuge biologists, I have learned how to capture wolves and lynx to monitor them with radio collars. I have seen both brown bear and black bears, and have learned how to distinguish moose browsed twigs from twigs browsed by snowshoe hares. I accompanied the Ecology team to an archeological site to take core samples from trees for aging, and I have learned how to operate a grid of snowshoe hare live traps. Working with lynx and snowshoe hares has been especially interesting; smells of cat scent and alfalfa cubes were at one time foreign to me, and I now miss them when they are absent from my daily routine.

Seven weeks of field experience is not nearly enough time to come to conclusions about a future with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, so I hope to work with them again. Nor is seven weeks in Alaska

time enough to catch more than a fleeting glimpse of what the forty-ninth state has to offer. After my term at the Kenai Refuge I will work in Denali National Park for a week on a backcountry patrol, hopefully with the biology crew.

My time in Alaska has definitely reinforced my dream of becoming an ecologist. I have learned about the ecology of the northern latitudes, experiencing it first hand on backpacking trips above tree line. Even the tundra, snowfree for such a short amount of time, presents a delicate yet thriving ecosystem.

As my next adventure I would like to try a different approach altogether, possibly taking an international assignment so that I can not only work in new ecological territory, but also in new cultural territory. I am interested in European conservation methods because Europe has had to confront conservation issues much longer than has the United States. I don't know if the Europeans have been able to think “outside the box” about their environmental problems, but I am eager to learn more about their approach.

I would strongly encourage other students, whether in high school or college to take the opportunity to work outside their familiar environment. Being away from friends and family is the slight price to pay for an unforgettable experience. I have not only seen amazing sunsets on the continental divide and swam in lakes with icebergs floating nearby, I have also met enthusiastic colleagues from all over the world that have taught me about different cultures and shared their viewpoints with me. A person can never know too much, and as an idealistic college student in search of the perfect future, I feel like I can never know enough about that big world outside my own box.

*Natalie Dawson is a junior majoring in ecology at Central Michigan University, who is working this summer at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. Information on the USFWS Career Awareness Institute can be found by calling 907-786-3510. Previous Refuge Notebook columns are on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*